

## BOOK REVIEWS

CASE, DONALD O. **Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior.** San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2002. 350 p. \$89.95. ISBN 0-12-150381-X. ©

Research into information-seeking behavior occupies a niche at the intersection of psychology, management, communications, and information science. Donald Case estimates there are more than 10,000 publications in these and other disciplines related to the basic human quest for knowledge. In *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behavior*, he presents a comprehensive survey of information behavior studies over the last two decades.

Information professionals often assume that users want, need, and use information. Intended to serve as an introductory text for graduate students and a review for information-seeking behavior researchers, this book examines those assumptions. The author makes a convincing case for the complexity of research that, among other things, attempts to define information, describe need, and explicate information use. In addition, his survey brings together traditional studies of how and what information users seek, as well as investigations based on Brenda Dervin's influential "sense-making" model (p. 70) that places information need and the behaviors to alleviate that need with the user.

Consequently, questions of why are pivotal in emerging literature, and the implications of browsing, information avoidance, information literacy, and information overload revert back to situation, background, and environmental stress of individuals at the center of the behavior. Case's book is an especially useful source, assembling and framing user-centered studies.

Information-seeking behavior models, such as Dervin's, serve to flesh out and guide theory. Case outlines other sources of social and psychological theory in information seeking, concluding "the diversity of theoretical borrowings makes a

single, comprehensive comparison impossible" (p. 140). His review indicates that the lack of a theoretical center limits meta-analysis and generalizations from combined data and continues to hinder empirical research into information-seeking behaviors.

With a quilt of vague definitions and half-stitched theories, how, then, have researchers approached the study of information seeking since the 1980s? In Case's view, the growing emphasis on users manifests itself in many recent studies of occupations, roles, and demographic groups. He provides methodological examples—such as case studies, experiments, and surveys—and he introduces evolving qualitative approaches and combinations of interviews, focus groups, diaries, historical analysis, and content analysis that characterize many information-behavior studies as they appear in contemporary information-seeking research.

Case quotes Tom Wilson's 1984 comment that "the study of information-seeking behaviour can be said to be the study of scientists' information-seeking behaviour" (p. 235). He assesses a widening occupational base of information-seeking behavior studies of social scientists, humanities scholars, managers, lawyers, and journalists. Health occupations are widely represented in his sampling. Progress in health and sciences has resulted in a staggering body of available information, proliferating electronic sources, and growing concerns about what health professionals and health consumers need to know and how they find it.

Case cites several health information-seeking studies that suggest innovative approaches. One is the use of clinical case histories or "vignettes" to elicit which sources might be used if a physician needed to seek additional information. His literature review, however, shows that, although the field is rife with health-focused studies, many still address only formal information sources that mask the process of information seeking.

A quick survey of recent articles

about information seeking in this journal suggests that interest in the information-seeking behavior of specialized health groups, consumers and patients, and occupations is strong. Over the past few years, information-seeking studies of veterinary medical students [1], health information consumers [2], health sciences faculty [3], older African American women [4], rural health professionals [5], and life and health scientists and health care providers [6] have appeared in the *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*. Most of these studies are not part of Case's survey and point to a literature that continues to grow at a fast pace.

In the complex task of surveying newer information-seeking behavior investigations, Case has performed a significant service for students and researchers. Major figures and minor contributors are discussed. He has mapped the unwieldy research into a framework, explicated terms and definitions, integrated models and theories, and placed them in the context of the history of these investigations. In doing so, he has created an updated comprehensive multidisciplinary bibliography and tool to assist future exploration. More than 700 publications are cited; recommended readings at the end of each chapter contain valuable annotations, and questions for discussion and application are included in an appendix.

Case does not shy away from questions of progress and utility in this research. He admits fragmentation, weak and borrowed theory, incompatible methods, and results that may be "less cumulative than ever" (p. 287). What Case establishes are the many paths leading to the current crossroads; readers would do well to consider his survey a navigational guide for future research.

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GEHLBACH, STEPHEN H. **Interpreting the Medical Literature**. 4th ed. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2002. 296 p. \$34.95. ISBN 0-07-138762-5. ©

From the title *Interpreting the Medical Literature*, readers might expect to find another book like the *User's Guides to the Medical Literature* [1, 2] and question the necessity of such a similar volume. The purpose of Gehlbach's book, however, despite its title, is to provide basic descriptions of various research study de-

signs that readers can then use to interpret the medical literature. While intended originally for medical students and clinicians, the book is relevant to any researcher, practitioner, or student in the health sciences. This fourth edition updates all previous ones by updating its references and examples, as well as expanding on the content.

The initial chapter as well as the final two chapters stay true to the title by discussing the reasons to read articles, the problems caused by information overload, the approaches to skimming and then analyzing articles, the purposes and usefulness of different document types (e.g., case studies versus letters to the editor versus reviews), and the need for critically reviewing and interpreting the material. Like the other chapters, these introductory and concluding sections offer useful tables and checklists as well as references for follow-up.

Five chapters cover study design, one chapter covers collecting data, and five more cover analyzing and interpreting data. Each chapter begins with an overview of a concept followed by an in-depth discussion including the benefits and challenges of each method. Numerous "real life" examples along with tables and diagrams allow readers to begin applying the theory while reviewing the literature and to judge for themselves if authors have used and identified methods correctly. Additionally, Gehlbach includes discussions of ethics, challenges, and implications in choosing different research study designs. Sum-

maries at the end of most chapters contain checklists or lists of questions for readers to use when analyzing studies in the literature. These summaries and checklists are among the most useful sections of this book.

Despite a somewhat pontifical tone in the introductions and conclusions of each chapter, Gehlbach's enthusiasm for the subject matter shines through in the discussions. He clarifies murky terminology and makes research design and statistical analysis understandable to those with little or no experience. He uses both analogies and real life examples to make the subject matter more readable.

Embedded in the preface, the statement "the emphasis remains on a basic understanding of study design, on the way subjects are selected and organized for study and the implications for the validity of results" (p. ix) summarizes the approach and strength of this book. *Interpreting the Medical Literature* meets its stated purpose.

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